
Space of refuge, space of war: reshaping territorial order in the Lake Chad area

Espaces-refuge, espaces de guerre : la reconfiguration de l'ordre territorial dans la région du lac Tchad

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**SPACE OF REFUGE, SPACE OF WAR:
RESHAPING TERRITORIAL ORDER
IN THE LAKE CHAD AREA**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this contribution is to frame the role and significance of borders and national space in the Lake Chad area in the wake of the expansion of the so-called “Boko Haram” insurgency. Since 2011, the forced repositioning of entire communities in neighboring states, the spread of refugee camps and the coordinated military effort conducted by the Multi-National Joint Task Force (a transnational army created by Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin) have led to a re-think in the relationship between mobility and territory, violent conflicts, and political entrepreneurship. Renewed political attention has mostly translated into a massive military-coordinated operation and in a series of emergency and development measures, which in turn have supplied the area with the basic social services that have traditionally been neglected by central governments. The gradual process of securitization, militarizing, and policing the area is testing the resistance of communities that have already endured cycles of economic and political marginalization, while increasing violence from “Boko Haram” and its affiliates is further destabilizing a weakened social balance. This work aims to study how terrorist violence and the militarization of public life in the region have reshaped the relationship between communities and their territory, while offering reasoning on concepts of territoriality, governmentality, and social identity.

During 2016, weakened by factional struggles among various leading figures from its *Shura* and worn down by the attention of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihād* has fatally lost its grip over large portions of the rural areas it once controlled.¹ Arrests by Nigerian, Chadian, and Cameroonian police² diminished the group's ambitions to "remain and expand" while almost simultaneously, *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya* (The Islamic State Organization) began to decline in Syria and Iraq.³ Today, though virtually defeated according to the propaganda-style statements by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari,⁴ Boko Haram is still able to move freely and operate in two small fiefdoms in the Mandara Mountains and Waza National Park (on the Cameroon-Nigeria border),⁵ while a plethora of "affiliated" groups has spread all across the Lake Chad area, provoking one of the fastest and largest population mass movements the zone has

1. *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihād* is the name of the historical core organization founded by the late Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009), which came to be popularly known as "Boko Haram". In its relatively brief history (2009-2017), the *Jamā'at* has faced a number of leadership conflicts, and has split into several inter-connected, yet divergent, branches. Among the most important branches are those led by the infamous Abubakar Shekau and Mamman Nur, the founder of and catalyst for *Jamā'atu Anṣārīl Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān*, commonly known as Ansaru, and the splinter association of Boko Haram. Another important division occurred in March 2015 after components of the group pledged allegiance to *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya* (The Islamic State Organization), thus becoming *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya Wīlāyat al-Gharb al-Ifriqiyya* (The Islamic State Organization's West Africa Province): this branch is apparently led by Yusuf's youngest surviving son, Abu Musab al-Barnawi.

2. "Khalid al-Barnawi: Nigeria Islamist group head 'arrested'", *BBC Africa*, 3 April 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35956301> (consulted 7/3/2017); "Tchad: un chef de Boko Haram arrêté", *BBC Africa*, 29 June 2015, http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region/2015/06/150629_tchad_arrests_boko_leader (consulted 7/3/2017).

3. The reference is to the motto assigned as a title of the *Dabiq* issue published in November 2014. "Remaining and expanding", *Dabiq*, issue no. 5, November 2014.

4. "Nigeria Boko Haram: Militants 'technically defeated' – Buhari", *BBC Africa*, 24 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35173618>; "Boko Haram technically defeated, Buhari insists", *Punch*, 6 February 2016, <http://punchng.com/boko-haram-technically-defeated-buhari-insists/> (both consulted 7/3/2017).

5. This is supported both by evidences drawn from the chronicles of attacks, suicide-bombings, massive kidnappings, ambushes and clashes reported by international and local medias in the last six months on the Nigeria-Cameroon border and neighboring areas (October 2016- April 2017) and by information collected by the author through several interviews in the concerned area during the same period.

ever known, despite its long history of migrations. In this paper⁶, we will analyze how the dynamic of violence and counter-violence started by “Boko Haram” changed realities and livelihoods in the Chad Basin, with a special focus on the living conditions of internally displaced persons and their perception of state, terrorist violence, and social space.

THE HOARDING DYNAMIC AND THE BOKO HARAM REGIME

The Lake Chad region is a space made up of periodically flooded areas, including marshes and wetland, and areas that are subject to irregular flooding: islands, the shoreline, and its hinterland. The environment is therefore subject to changes in flooding patterns, depending on the levels of precipitation in the Chari basin, which has thus given rise to an *a minima* description of the physical geography of the lake as the “*petit lac*”, “*moyen lac*”, and “*grand lac*” (Tilho 1904). The so-called *grand lac* last appeared during the 1950s, leaving space for the *moyen lac*. Since the mid-1970s the *petit lac*, which is made up of several bodies of water separated by the central Great Barrier, has represented the current geographical condition of Lake Chad. These waters are highly subject to flooding, which extends the lake’s surface through seasonal and permanent swamps (Magrin, Lemoalle, Portier 2015). The vegetation is composed of reed and papyrus (the widely-spread *ambatch*), and naturally forms a number of floating islands (*kirtas*), which are used by fishermen and shepherds. Circulation in the area has always been complicated by its geography, and it has only permitted a relative degree of control, first by the colonial administration and then by the four different states into which the lake has

6. The data for this analysis are the result of field research begun in October 2014 and still ongoing in April 2017 in various local areas in the wider Lake Chad Basin, mainly in Nigeria and Chad. More than 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews, discussions, and dialogues have been conducted in Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, N’Djamena, Bol, and Baga Sola. We have chosen not to mention the identity of the interviewees in this paper for security reasons.

been divided (Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon).⁷ Because circulation is dependent on oscillations in water levels, the archipelago's inhabitants have become nomads who migrate seasonally with their livestock.⁸ A complex mechanism of regulation among the different communities has yielded to a customary right for the attribution of land, usage fees for land, and management of the lake's natural resources.⁹ The great droughts (1973, 1984), which gave rise to the current *petit lac* season, marked the beginning of a progressive asymmetry between resources and users. While in the mid-1970s the population around the lake numbered approximately 700,000, the total number of people who depended on the lake's resources in 2013 was more or less 2.2 million. This rise in economic exploitation in such a short timespan has seriously endangered the environment, compromising the livelihood of its primary inhabitants, the Buduma, and intensifying conflicts between long-standing users, new arrivals, and waves of West African migrants (Malians, Burkinabés), while also throwing resource management off balance. Fishermen use

7. In 1998, after many years of neglect, the four coastal states (on the initiative of Nigeria, which created the first outpost in Baga in 1994) abandoned the idea of intervening politically and resorted to military force in an early attempt to place the area under their control and halt smuggling and trafficking activities, to "checkmate banditry". When attacks by Boko Haram began in 2012, the mandate of the so-called Multi-National Joint Task Force was expanded to include counter-terrorism activities. See "BAGA: Multinational Joint Task Forces, BHTs And Host Community", Lt. Col. Sagir Musa, *Sahara Reporters*, 7 May 2013, <http://saharareporters.com/2013/05/07/baga-multinational-joint-task-forces-bhts-and-host-community-lt-col-sagir-musa> (consulted 10/5/2017).

8. The maze-like geography of the lake and, broadly speaking, its population, has been interestingly highlighted since the earliest attempts by colonial administrators to administer it and exercise some kind of sovereignty over it, as has been stated in a number of official reports: see, for instance "Reconnaissance effectuée dans les îles du lac Tchad (Fort Lamy, 10 juin 1902)", "Rapport Politique (Goulfei, 1 mars 1902) sur la Région Militaire du Tchad: Région de Bas-Chari, Îles du Tchad, Région Dagana-Kanem", ANOMAEF GI D/4(4)/1-2, Archives nationales d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence. Likewise, there is an interesting account of the relationship between the colonial administration and the lake's inhabitants, the so-called "*nomades du lac*", by the late Colonel Jean Chapelle (1905-1986). See J. Chapelle (1987).

9. These processes and the attribution of lands in general are administered by three key figures: the "*chef de canton*" (District Officer), the "*chef de village, île ou polder*" (village, island or polder chief), and the "*diguedji*". The first of these, or *Mai*, who is a religious figure, has a mandate to settle conflicts between the inhabitants and provide security for the community. The second is in charge of the assignment of plots of land to family members according to the number of workers present. The third has a dual responsibility: as master of ceremonies and to decide on boundaries for plots of land.

kilometers of “Malian” *gura* (fish traps), thus creating a barrier (*dumba*) behind which herds graze in the rich green pastures. After the herders come the farmers, who employ motor pumps to “raise the waters” and grow corn, potatoes, cowpeas, onions, tomatoes, and sugarcane. The shores of the lake are deemed to be a free access zone, and even though many disputes ensue among its users, very few end up in court. In addition, speculative ploys by urban purchasers and the commercial *élite* have caused an escalation in land prices, which has seriously affected the poor belt of farmers, herders, and fishermen, leaving them few opportunities to lawfully govern access rights to the land. These phenomena have revived the native-settler dichotomy discourse, and economic and linguistic rivalries have been increasing in ports and markets, mainly between the native (Buduma, Kanembu) fishermen and the Hausaphone commercial *élite*.¹⁰ Because they control the fishing trade and in many cases fund fishing trips, the latter have gained a prominent economic role in the lake region, and are mostly perceived as importers of an alien economic vision that clashes with the customary rights of free access to the waters and diverts the natural riches of Lake Chad to faraway urban centers. Nonetheless, this economic reality has been quickly accepted. In recent years, a widespread practice has emerged that sees a number of small-scale fishermen equipped with individual speedboats or motorized pirogues descend upon the various shorelines and unlawfully occupy them. This cannot be unconnected with the simultaneous spread of small caliber, mostly artisan, home-made weapons,¹¹ and of more modern AK 47s of uncertain origin,¹² which are traded and transported between the various shores of the lake by Buduma smugglers and ferrymen across a transnational space that is the equivalent of a lawless area (*zone de non-droit*). Many fishermen and herders recount that customs officers were acquiescent to and sometimes involved in this trade before the explosion of the “Boko Haram” crisis, which partially explains how checks and fees used to be

10. As elsewhere, the native-settler dichotomy is one of the most sensitive issues, especially as it relates to rights to economic exploitation. On the Nigerien and Nigerian sides of the lake, Kanuri elders tend to ascribe a presumed “Chadian” origin to Buduma fishermen, drawing their conclusion from the fact that there are no Buduma toponyms on their side of the lake. On the conflicts relating to the fisheries sector, see Hadiza Kiari Fougou 2014, *Impacts des variations du niveau du lac Tchad sur les activités socio-économiques des pêcheurs de la partie nigérienne*, PhD thesis, Université Abdou Moumouni, Niamey (Niger).

11. These are collectively known in north-eastern Nigeria as “Dane guns”. Despite its name, the rifle is manufactured locally, and is widespread throughout West Africa. It derives its name from early trading relationships that the Kingdom of Denmark maintained in the Gulf of Guinea for almost two centuries (1658-1850) thanks to the Gold Coast colonies (in present-day Ghana).

12. Allegedly from Sudan and Libya.

circumvented.¹³ The appearance of “Boko Haram” on the lake and the favorable reception provided by some islanders reveal the self-proclaimed sect’s shallow religious façade and the main source of its economic assets: many young islanders seem to join the organization’s ranks as a means of liberating themselves from traditional hierarchical power structures that exclude them from enjoying what they perceive as the *conditio sine qua non* for an emancipated life in the community: a craft or trade, a vehicle, social status to take a wife. For them, accepting the deal proposed by the organization seems to be a quicker and more efficient way of obtaining what they regard as their legitimate right. This attitude would appear to be the logical outcome of the deteriorating process of land and water grabbing that began many years ago, and also of the growing ties between “Boko Haram” and ordinary bandits that is taking place in the Gwoza, Madagali, Michika, Bama, and Dikwa Local Government Areas (LGAs) (Adamawa and Borno State, Nigeria) and Mayo-Sava (Cameroon) following the implementation of deregulation, privatization and adjustment policies.¹⁴ Many adults in the communities we visited explain this behavior by pointing out several interconnected economic issues: the shrinking of the lake’s dimensions, increasing competition, and relative joblessness. In the background to their words there is the cultural perception of the archipelago’s isolation from the rest of the country: although they are fully aware of the changes, trends, and goods coming from the cities, young people see themselves as “far” from them, with few possibilities to integrate or afford them except by violent means or hoarding.¹⁵ Rather than representing a massive episode of religious zeal, “Boko Haram”’s appearance in the region has been an opportunity for a brutal and unscrupulous buy-out of exclusive trading, fishing, and herding rights around the lake. Significantly, for many interviewees, “entering Boko Haram” (*devenir Boko Haram*) seems to be somewhat equivalent to *se débrouiller* (getting sorted out, broadly speaking) referring to *coupeurs de route* (road-cutters),¹⁶ described by S. Issa on the Diamaré plains (Cameroon) as the *art de bien se conduire* (Issa 2012). The main effect of this process is that the lake’s precarious equilibrium is

13. Interview, Bol (Chad), December 2016.

14. In many cases, it has been observed that the funds and goods collected by means of violent dispossession by criminal gangs operating under the “Boko Haram” banner are seldom employed to finance legal businesses (such as the cattle, keke NAPEP (motorized rickshaw), or market business), thereby creating a continuous flow between the illegal and legal realms. See A. Iocchi 2016, “Boko Haram: Trans-National Flows and the Quest for an Economic Space”, in *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, no. 12\13, pp. 97-105.

15. Interviews with many unemployed young people in Bol and Baga Sola, December 2016.

16. Interview, Baga Sola (Chad), December 2016.

endangered: replacement of the working cross-functionality of these fertile, swampy spaces by exclusive use by private owners stands in opposition to customary rights, poses serious mobility problems for the population, and disturbs, and even weakens, the natural cycles of this fragile environment. Over the past thirty years, the intensification of speculative practices has set in motion a cycle of increasingly aggressive economic competition for the relatively scarce resources, which in turn has produced a widespread marginalization of “native” groups, and, as a result, an underlying malaise. “Boko Haram”’s expansion into the “swaths” of Lake Chad has exploited this dissatisfaction and used it to give new life to an organization that had seemed worn down, divided and conflicted. The employment of religious arguments (*tawhīd*, *jihād*, the fight against *bida’* and *širk*) for the recruitment of young *fiġs de Buduma* (islanders) appears to be crucial here: in line with the dynamic found in Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Tsagana (Cameroon) and south-eastern Borno (Nigeria), where Boko Haram attracted young people who were precariously employed in markets and urban centers and had recently converted to Islam (butchers, mini-bus *chargeurs*, or *clandomen*), the archipelago’s reputation as an area of recent Islamization where superstitions and *kirdi* (non-Muslim) practices are still widespread and people are eagerly seeking religious modernization

has somewhat facilitated the task.¹⁷ However, “Boko Haram”’s religious appeal and strategy of economic accumulation only worked for so long as the imposing military deployment was located far from the Lac territory and the region’s economy had not been impaired by a state of war and the ensuing humanitarian emergency. When the islands were abandoned, the once free flow of herds began to decrease, and pillage was no longer economically rewarding; the operations led by locally-affiliated groups were thus revealed to be an inevitably short-sighted solution to long-standing issues. In the long term, “Boko Haram”’s strategy of economic accumulation through a form of lagoon banditry failed to be viewed by most of the population either as a legitimate means of survival, as the most recent news of massive defections seems to demonstrate, or even as a useful one. The surrender of approximately 400 people

17. Although the lake’s geography kept the islanders in relative isolation until recent years (the process of *apprivoisement* was still under way in late colonial times, between 1950 and 1960), the Buduma islanders live in the heart of one of the oldest Islamic regions in Africa. Apart from the continuous commercial traffic that links all the communities in and around the lake in spite of the different political regimes, one needs to take account of the great cultural proximity and the shared religious history. Echoes of Uthman dan Fodio’s *jihād* in 1804 and the undisputed prestige of the al-Kanemi dynasty of the Kanem-Bornu Empire have contributed to shape the cultural and religious identity of many Muslims in the Lake Chad Basin: Bornu is traditionally regarded as an indisputable abode of Islamic knowledge, and many of the lake’s children and teenagers are sent there to study and learn the Quran (thus becoming *gardanci*). Another important religious aspect that must be mentioned is the significance of the Mahdist memory of the Adamaoua and Gombe Emirates (part of the Sokoto Caliphate, which is now split between Nigeria and Cameroon), which is identified through different figures: Attahiru I, a *Sarkin Musulmi* (Commander of the Believers) who rejected British occupation in 1903 and started his *hijira* eastward, dying in Gombe; the Sudanese warlord turned *Mahdi* Rabih az-Zubayr ibn Fadlallah, who died in present-day Kousseri in 1900; Hayatu bin Said, a Fulani cleric from northern Adamaoua (Cameroon), who was imprisoned by British officers in 1923; Jibril Gaini, a follower of Hayatu bin Said and the creator of a *Mahdi* state on the Sokoto-Bornu border in present-day Gombe (Nigeria). See R. A. Adeleye 1970, “Rabih b. Fadlallah and the diplomacy of European imperial invasion in the Central Sudan, 1893-1902”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 399-418; M. Njeuma 1971, “Adamawa and Mahdism: The Career of Hayatu Ibn Sa’id in Adamawa, 1878-1898”, *The Journal of African History* Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 61-77; and J. E. Lavers 1967, “Jibril Gaini: a preliminary account of the career of a Mahdist leader in North-Eastern Nigeria”, *Research Bulletin*, Centre of Arabic Documentation, Ibadan, iii, 16-38.

(men, women, and children) from the Kaiga and Ngouboua areas¹⁸ between August and October 2016 is only the beginning of a process that is still under way, and which demonstrates the comparatively poorer economic attractiveness of “Boko Haram”’s regime today, its substantial lack of efficiency in the face of the greater military means of the MNJTF, and its lack of appeal compared to the services provided by humanitarians and NGOs.

A SPACE OF REFUGE, A SPACE OF WAR

Within this difficult equilibrium, the displacement of entire communities at the hands of “Boko Haram” has brought the region to its knees. In Chad alone, 275,000 people are in need of humanitarian assistance. In the Lac Region, there are 127,000 displaced people, including 6,600 refugees, and there are fears that rising insecurity and wide-scale military operations could trigger new population displacements. Meanwhile, food security has continued to worsen, with more than 133,000 severely food insecure people in the region (World Vision 2016). Displaced communities are relying mainly on food assistance in a region where many of the host population are already highly vulnerable, and malnutrition rates continue to be above emergency thresholds.¹⁹ This situation has been aggravated by the constant flows of people, which has significantly reshaped social stability and territorial order in the region. In the Department of Mamdi, the Sultan and *chef de canton*, Youssouf Mboudou Mbami, has guaranteed the settlement of a number of displaced communities in areas within range of the city, all along the main route connecting Bol to Baga Sola, at the same time making them reachable by the NGOs operating in the area and finally safe from the frequent “Boko Haram” incursions.²⁰ The shoreline and the hinterland between the two cities have seen an explosion of encampments and villages, which has meant that the inner archipelago has become virtually deserted. Thanks to their position,

18. “Tchad: nombreuses redditions d’éléments de “Boko Haram” en provenance du Nigeria”, *RFI*, 13 November 2016, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20161113-boko-haram-tchad-nigeria-redditions-reportage-bagassola> (checked 7/3/2017); though the episode mentioned only seems to be the first: “Niger: reddition de combattants Boko Haram”, *BBC Africa*, 6 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-38527190> (checked 7/3/2017).

19. All data are updated to October 2016.

20. Communication with the Sultan, Bol, December 2016.

many of these sites have been provided with pits and informal schools and some of them have temporary medical centers.²¹

Life before and since the “Boko Haram” crisis has changed significantly, in what many internally displaced persons (IDPs) have significantly referred to as “a passage to civilization”: delivery of education and healthcare services and direct access to markets and bore holes have turned this once nomadic population into a “settled” one that can enjoy the proximity to government infrastructures and exposure to life on the mainland. Many people seem to enjoy some of what they call the “comforts” of life at the site, with specific reference to the provision of food vouchers or pocket money by NGOs. The humanitarian machine must intervene in a general situation in which there is clearly poor coordination between the military structure and civil society and considerable vagueness regarding missions and responsibilities. The difficulties in leading the shift from “emergency” to “development” reflect the contradictions of a system that has to simultaneously respond to a military crisis and a food emergency, a system which is in need of a strong environmental and regional cooperation plan. The currently-operating “domain division” between Chad’s government and the *planète des ONG* active in the Lac region fully reflects a wider, country-level dynamic that has already been observed in refugees crisis in Sudan (since 2003) and the Central African Republic (since 2004). This dynamic is in turn a mirror of the effect observed by M. Duffield on the complementarity between development and security (Duffield 2007). The expansion of security to societal aspects of life (the “human security” invoked long ago by international organizations)²² in the Lake does not improve the living conditions of displaced people or refugees in any way, and yet it marks their distinction, and therefore their seclusion, from the community; moreover, the process seriously impairs their capacity to autonomously earn a decent living outside the humanitarian machine. The topographical structure of the lake leads to unbalanced, and therefore fluctuating, control of the terrain. Army actions vary from time to time based to

21. Once a neglected peripheral region, in the aftermath of the “Boko Haram” crisis the world (and, therefore, local governments) have suddenly taken an interest in the Lake Chad area, and have therefore begun to funnel an impressive amount of financial aid for humanitarian purposes. In January 2017, the European Commission released €40 million “in additional humanitarian aid to support the populations in the Lake Chad region”, bringing the EU’s overall funding for the region since 2016 to over €116 million. Nigeria will receive the largest slice (€22 million), followed by Cameroon (€7 million), Niger (€6 million), and Chad (€5 million). During the United Nations-supported humanitarian conference on “Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region” held in Oslo on 24 February 2017, many donors pledged to donate \$458 million in relief and an additional \$218 in the coming years.

22. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1994.

external political pressures. The long-sought-after political sovereignty over the lake, which has been a chimera for most colonial and post-colonial regimes, is asserted through an oscillating military presence, on which the NGOs' work is inevitably dependent. This reveals a great deal about governance processes inside the *Armée Nationale Tchadienne* (ANT), which has been described as a 'militianized' army (Marchal 1997; Debos 2016): heavily ethnically-polarized, with a bad human rights record,²³ the ANT seems to behave like a troop of praetorian guards that has been recruited on the basis of a system of patronage, which is ultimately able to train formidable warriors and masters of guerrilla warfare, but clearly not peacekeepers. This general lack of accountability in the Chadian army clashes with France's and the United States' visions of security and development in the area, even though they have no qualms about offering massive funding, equipping and training to the army.²⁴ In the Lac region, we can therefore note that resistance between security imperatives and the need to implement emergency and development actions conveys the impression of a general stalemate among the IDP community and the local population. As an old religious teacher in the IDP site of Kindjiria once said: "We wait for the aid to feed us. We wait for the soldiers to be safe. We are stuck."²⁵

Many people²⁶ referred to informal statements by officers and soldiers stationed in the area, and implied that the security operations and the expulsion of "Boko Haram" members from the archipelago is progressing successfully, and that people will soon be able to return to their fields and homes, but as yet no effective action or assurance has come from the State or from

23. In this respect, see R. Marchal 2015, "CAR and the regional (dis)order", in T. Carayannis, L. Lombard (eds.), *Making sense of the Central African Republic*, London, Zed Books, pp. 166-193; "Mali: quelle enquête après une possible bavure des militaires tchadiens?", *RFI*, 27 May 2016, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160527-mali-soupcons-bavure-militaires-tchadiens-minusma-enquete-interne-casques-bleus> (checked 7/3/2017).

24. Between 2009 and 2013, the United States allocated a total of \$13 million to Chad in the context of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP): it is therefore no accident that between 2006 and 2010 Chad became one of the top three weapons importers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

25. Testimonies collected at the IDP site in Kindjiria, Mamdi Department (Chad), December 2016.

26. Interviews at the Yakoua, Melea, Darkani, and Kindjiria IDP sites, Mamdi Department (Chad), December 2016.

international military organizations.²⁷ A number of women have admitted to finding adjusting to life on the mainland, away from their native lands and with no humanitarian aid (*bana nasara*, literally “white people’s aid”), a daunting task: various *ménages* (household) have suffered the loss of husbands and older sons, and must rely on international aid alone; they see few opportunities for them and their younger children in the near future.²⁸ Current prospects leave these people few options but to return to their homes, although they are well aware that the “Boko Haram people” may come back sooner or later. Some prefer to quietly return to the fields, visiting the IDP site only at voucher distribution times. This practice is openly tolerated by both NGOs workers and military officers, who understand the situation and see some convenience in it: tips and information on sightings and movements in the archipelago are an essential part of their security work, and former residents are also frequently employed as guides.²⁹ For many others, however, it is hard to accept the idea of leaving the humanitarian aid provision program: the loss of all their herds and goods and the impossibility of returning to their native lands lead many IDPs to see no other option but to rely to *bana nasara* and keep waiting for the end of this war without a front. What used to be their home – the floating islands and seasonally flooded lands – is now an outpost for the ANT’s operations in the context of the multilateral intervention contingent. Even though increasing large numbers of “Boko Haram” members are gradually giving up, a hardline group is in control of many islands on the Niger side of the lake.³⁰ The archipelago is the most uncommon war zone that has ever been seen: while the progression of the *saïson sèche* (dry season) gradually reveals more and more wetland spaces, solitary herds graze quietly and, mostly at dawn, fishermen on pirogues drag their creels out of the water.

27. Interview collected at the IDP site in Dabantchali, Mamdi Department (Chad), December 2016. Besides the Multi-National Joint Task Force that has been deployed to fight “Boko Haram”, routine operations in the region by the French Army within the framework of *Operation Barkhane* and by the United States African Command (AFRICOM) in the context of the broader ‘war on terror’ have been recorded.

28. Interview, Kindjiria IDP site, Mamdi Department (Chad), December 2016.

29. Interview, Melea IDP site, Mamdi Department (Chad), December 2016. In fact, many NGOs operators seem to turn a blind eye to people who apparently leave the IDP site and return to their herding activities on *kirtas*, while they are still recipients of vouchers and aid. The same attitude is shown by police and military officers, who turn a blind eye in exchange for informations and tips on people’s movements across the wider archipelago.

30. According to information gathered during a conversation with two young female refugees who had recently fled from a *madrassa* camp on the north-west side of the Lake (in N’Guigmi Department, Niger), this area was apparently under the command of Mamman Nur. Bol, December 2016.

This tableau is only occasionally changed by the appearance of launches crossing the river at high speed. From the mainland, no shots or shouts are heard: one might wonder whether the front line, and therefore the “war”, actually exists somewhere in the interior of the archipelago.

CONCLUSION

The swamps along the lake have become the unusual front of a war that has no agreed front-line and follows no orthodox rules of warfare. The war against “Boko Haram” is fought on a maze-like group of floating islands on Lake Chad and in the middle of some of the largest and most dense forest between Cameroon and Nigeria, on the periphery of what was once the Sokoto Caliphate. A significant part of the data and intelligence is collected through the powerful means of Western countries, which mostly use hi-tech combat aircraft, and also establish the “Sahelian” strategy framework for anti-terrorism: drone flights operating from the US bases in neighboring Agadez and Garoua join the almost daily flights carried out by the French *Armée de l’air* from the *Operation Barkhane* base at N’Djamena. The financial support provided by France and the United States has enabled a gradual modernization of the ANT, including intensive training programs with various European Union military instructors (in addition to the Flintlock training program developed by the US Army), progressive specialization in different areas, and encouragement to cooperate in practical terms with neighboring countries (Cameroon above all) in order to fully realize widespread military coverage of the Lake Chad Basin area and, *latu sensu*, of Sahel (Pérouse de Monclos 2015). While on the one hand this unusual ‘war on terror’ is being conducted using Western military technology’s most sophisticated products, on the other the presumed “terrorists” display the most rudimentary artisan weapons, such as bows, arrows, spears, and home-made weapons during clashes and violent confrontations; only high-ranking chiefs and lieutenants can carry AK-47s and other types of assault rifle. Likewise, while drones monitor hundreds of square kilometers of desert, swamp and forest, the most important information comes from locally-located informants. The historical emergence of functional sub- and trans-national regimes of authority, to which “Boko Haram” is directly linked, and their capacity for dispossession and accumulation are constantly underplayed for political reasons by both regional and international governments, which clearly prefer the “religious terrorism” label so that they can achieve their own political agendas (Iocchi 2015). In the near future, this will most likely lead to a strengthening of multinational military deployment in the area. Although it may not be superficially perceived as intruding on the social fabric, it is already altering the economy and the stability of an exhausted region. While the lake’s communities will undoubtedly continue to accommodate hundreds of displaced people who are more or less kinfolk “*pour ne pas*

les laisser sous l'arbre", they are wondering when the funds employed to apply emergency measures will be diverted to financing long-term development projects. The essential requirement should be to replace these emergency encampment models, which ultimately seem to fuel a paradigm of mutual dependency that has already been enacted in other realities and is unavoidably doomed to fall short of expectations.

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